Semiotics for Beginners

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Introduction

Ferdinand de Saussure

> A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (from the Greek *semeion* 'sign'). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts. (Saussure, cited in Hawkes 1977, 123)

Thus wrote the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), a founder not only of linguistics but also of what is now more usually referred to as semiotics (in his *Course in General Linguistics*, 1915). Other than Saussure (the usual abbreviation), key figures in the early development of semiotics were the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (*sic*, pronounced 'purse') (1839-1914) and later Charles William Morris (1901-1979). Leading modern semiotic theorists include Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Umberto Eco (b 1932), Christian Metz, Julia Kristeva (b 1941) and Algirdas Greimas (b 1917). A number of linguists work within a semiotic framework, such as Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) and Michael A K Halliday. Formal semiotics is difficult to disentangle from structuralism, whose major exponents include Claude Lévi-Strauss (b 1908) in anthropology and Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis. However, Deborah Cameron suggests that structuralism is merely 'a method you can use' in semiotics (Cameron 1992, 25). Contemporary *social semiotics* has moved beyond the structuralist concern with the internal relations of parts within a self-

contained system. Modern semiotic theory is also sometimes allied with a Marxist approach which tends to stress the role of *ideology* (see Woollacott 1982, 103ff).

Semiotics began to become a major approach to media theory in the late 1960s, and its adoption in Britain was influenced by its prominence in the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham whilst the centre was under the direction of the neo-Marxist sociologist Stuart Hall (1969-79). Although semiotics may be less central now within media theory (at least in its earlier, more structuralist form), it remains essential for anyone in the field to understand it. What individual media scholars have to assess, of course, is whether and how semiotics may be useful in shedding light on any aspect of our concerns. Note that Saussure's term, 'semiology' is sometimes used to refer to the Saussurean tradition, whilst 'semiotics' sometimes refers to the Peircean tradition, but that nowadays the term 'semiotics' is more likely to be used as an umbrella term to embrace the whole field (Nöth 1990, 14).

The most common brief definition of semiotics is 'the study of signs' (or 'the theory of signs'). It involves the study not only of what we refer to as 'signs' in everyday speech, but of anything which 'stands for' something else. In a semiotic sense, signs include words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. Such signs are studied not in isolation but as part of semiotic 'sign systems' (such as a medium or genre). Stam *et al.* define semiotics more fully as 'the study of signs, signification and signifying systems' (Stam *et al.* 1992, 1). Put more simply, semioticians study how *meanings* are made. For John Fiske and John Hartley 'the central concerns of semiotics... are:... the relationship between a sign and its meaning; and the way signs are combined into codes' (Fiske & Hartley 1978, 37). C W Morris divided the subject into three branches:

- *semantics*: the meaning of signs (the relationship of signs to what they stand for);
- *syntactics* (or *syntax*): the relations between signs;
- *pragmatics*: the ways in which signs are used and interpreted.
(Ullmann 1972, 15; Nöth 1990, 50)

Semiotics is often employed in the analysis of 'texts' in any medium (although it is far more than just a mode of textual analysis). There are, of course, other approaches to textual analysis - notably rhetoric, hermeneutics, literary criticism, discourse analysis and 'content analysis'. In the field of media and communication studies content analysis is a prominent rival to semiotics as a method of textual analysis. Whereas semiotics is now closely associated with cultural studies, content analysis is well-established within the mainstream tradition of social science research. Whilst content analysis involves a quantitative approach to the analysis of the manifest 'content' of media texts,

semiotics seeks to analyse media texts as structured wholes and investigates latent, connotative meanings. Semiotics is rarely quantitative, and often involves a rejection of such approaches. As Olivier Burgelin argued: 'There is no reason to assume that the item which recurs most frequently is the most important or the most significant, for a text is, clearly, a *structured* whole, and the place occupied by the different elements is more important than the number of times they recur' (Burgelin 1968, 319; also cited in Woollacott 1982, 93). A social semiotician would also emphasize the importance of the significance which readers attach to the signs within a text. Whereas *content analysis* focuses on explicit content and tends to suggest that this represents a single, fixed meaning, semiotic studies focus on the system of rules governing the 'discourse' involved in media texts, stressing the role of semiotic context in shaping meaning (see Woollacott 1982, 93-4). However, some researchers have combined semiotic analysis and content analysis (e.g. Glasgow University Media Group 1980; Leiss *et al.* 1990).

Some commentators define semiotics as 'the science of signs'. However, the term 'science' is misleading: as James Monaco points out, semiotics 'is most definitely not a science in the sense that physics or biology is a science' (Monaco 1981, 140). It is not a strictly empirical science, though Bob Hodge and David Tripp do employ empirical methods in their classic study of *Children and Television* (1986). John Fiske notes that:

> Semiotics is essentially a theoretical approach to communication in that its aim is to establish widely applicable principles... It is thus vulnerable to the criticism that it is too theoretical, too speculative and that semioticians make no attempt to prove or disprove their theories in an objective, scientific way. (Fiske 1982, 118)

Semiotics represents a range of studies in art, literature, anthropology and the mass media rather than an independent academic discipline. Those involved in semiotics include linguists, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, literary, aesthetic and media theorists and educationalists. Beyond the most basic definition, there is considerable variation amongst leading semioticians as to what semiotics involves. It is not only concerned with (intentional) communication but also with our ascription of significance to anything in the world. Semiotics has changed over time, since semioticians have sought to remedy weaknesses in early semiotic approaches. Even with the most basic semiotic terms there are multiple definitions (see Nöth 1995 for handy catalogues of differences regarding such key terms as sign, symbol, index, icon and code). Consequently, anyone attempting semiotic analysis would be wise to make clear which definitions are being adopted. There are two divergent traditions in semiotics stemming respectively from Saussure and Peirce; where the approach of a particular semiotician is employed this also needs to be made clear. The writings of semioticians have a reputation for being dense with jargon:

Justin Lewis notes that 'its advocates have written in a style that ranges from the obscure to the incomprehensible' (Lewis 1991, 25); another critic wittily remarked that 'semiotics tells us things we already know in a language we will never understand' (Paddy Whannel, cited in Seiter 1992, 1). It may be easier for beginners to approach semiotics initially via secondary sources (see Suggested Reading).

Because of the influence of Saussure, and because linguistics is a more established discipline than the study of other sign systems, semiotics draws heavily on linguistic concepts. Saussure saw linguistics as a branch of semiotics, though Roland Barthes and some other semioticians have treated semiotics as a branch of linguistics (Burgin 1982, 50). Semioticians commonly refer to films, television and radio programmes, advertising posters and so on as 'texts', and Fiske and Hartley (1978) referred to 'reading television'. Media such as television and film are regarded by some semioticians as being like 'languages'. The issue tends to revolve around whether film is closer to what we treat as 'reality' in the everyday world of our own experience or whether it has more in common with a symbolic system like writing (see Lapsley & Westlake 1988, 38ff).

Some refer to the 'grammar' of media other than language (see Monaco 1981, 121ff). For James Monaco, 'film has no grammar', and he offers a useful critique of glib analogies between film techniques and the grammar of natural language (*ibid.*, 129). There is a danger of trying to force all media into a linguistic framework. With regard to photography (though one might say the same for film and television), Victor Burgin insists that:

> There is no 'language' of photography, no single signifying system (as opposed to technical apparatus) upon which all photographs depend (in the sense in which all texts in English depend upon the English language); there is, rather, a heterogeneous complex of codes upon which photography may draw. (Burgin 1982, 143)

The linguistic model often leads semioticians to a search for units of analysis in audio-visual media which are analogous to those used in linguistics. In the semiotics of film, crude equivalents with written language are sometimes postulated: such as the frame as morpheme (or word), the shot as sentence, the scene as paragraph, and the sequence as chapter (suggested equivalences vary amongst commentators) (see Lapsley & Westlake 1988, 39ff). For members of the Glasgow University Media Group the basic unit of analysis was the shot, delimited by cuts and with allowance made for camera movement within the shot and for the accompanying soundtrack (Davis & Walton 1983b, 43). However, the shot is hardly the smallest possible unit. Each frame could be broken into smaller meaningful units, though we'd be unlikely to agree about what these might be. To avoid privileging linguistic terms, Algirdas Greimas uses the term *seme* to refer to the smallest unit of meaning in a sign (Fiske & Hartley 1978, 54).

Saussure made what is now a famous distinction between *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech). *Langue* refers to the system of rules and conventions which is independent of individual users; *parole* refers to its use in particular instances (this is similar to Noam Chomsky's distinction between *competence* and *performance*). According to this Saussurean distinction, in a semiotic system such as cinema, 'any specific film is the speech of that underlying system of cinema language' (Langholz Leymore 1975, 3).

Whilst Saussure may be hailed as a founder of semiotics, semiotics has become increasingly less Saussurean. Teresa de Lauretis describes the movement away from structuralist semiotics which began in the 1970s:

> In the last decade or so, semiotics has undergone a shift of its theoretical gears: a shift away from the classification of sign systems - their basic units, their levels of structural organization - and towards the exploration of the modes of production of signs and meanings, the ways in which systems and codes are used, transformed or transgressed in social practice. While formerly the emphasis was on studying sign systems (language, literature, cinema, architecture, music, etc.), conceived of as mechanisms that generate messages, what is now being examined is the work performed through them. It is this work or activity which constitutes and/or transforms the codes, at the same time as it constitutes and transforms the individuals using the codes, performing the work; the individuals who are, therefore, the subjects of semiosis.
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> 'Semiosis', a term borrowed from Charles Sanders Peirce, is expanded by Eco to designate the process by which a culture produces signs and/or attributes meaning to signs. Although for Eco meaning production or semiosis is a social activity, he allows that subjective factors are involved in each individual act of semiosis. The notion then might be pertinent to the two main emphases of current, or poststructuralist, semiotic theory. One is a semiotics focused on the subjective aspects of signification and strongly influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, where meaning is construed as a subject-effect (the subject being an effect of the signifier). The other is a semiotics concerned to stress the social aspect of signification, its practical, aesthetic, or ideological use in interpersonal communication; there, meaning is construed as semantic value produced through culturally shared codes. (de Lauretis 1984, 167)

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